

*The Trouble with Confucianism*

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*For Fanny – to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary  
of our meeting.*

On recent visits to mainland China I have been asked, most often by young people, a question that would have seemed almost unthinkable twenty years ago: What is the significance of Confucianism today? Though for me it is not a question easy to answer, I can sympathize with the curiosity and concerns of my questioners. Their eagerness to learn about Confucianism comes after decades in which it was virtually off-limits to any kind of serious study or discussion in Mao's China. Indeed so neglected had Confucius become by the time of the Cultural Revolution, and so shadowy a figure was he in most people's minds that the Gang of Four at the start of their anti-Confucian campaign found him a poor target of attack. Confucius had first to be resurrected before he could be pilloried and crucified. Yet, ever since, he has continued to haunt the scene. Like Harry in Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Trouble with Harry* Confucius has refused to stay buried.

Today too, despite the new, more considered attention given to Confucius, his place is still unsettled and his status unclear. For some younger people, the bitter disillusionment that followed the Cultural Revolution and the eclipse of Mao has left them looking everywhere, abroad and at home, for something to replace the god that failed. For others, heirs of the May Fourth movement and steeped in the anti-Confucian satires of Lu Hsun as they never were in the Confucian classics, Confucianism still lurks as the specter of a reactionary and repressive past, surviving in antidemocratic, "feudal" features of the current regime. The suspicion, among those who, forty years after "liberation," still seek to be liberated, is that the new pragmatic policy in Beijing

gives tacit support to the revival of a conservative ideology that would dampen dissent and buttress the status quo. Even the West's newfound interest in Confucianism is, from this point of view, apt to be dismissed as hopelessly anachronistic. Indeed, for those still disposed to consider religions (perhaps now along with Marxism) as the opiate of the people, any sympathetic approach to Confucianism in the West seems to be a romantic illusion, a wishful idealization of China's past on a par with other pipe dreams of Westerners seeking some escape into Oriental mysticism, Zen Buddhism, or transcendental meditation.

Nor are such divergent views found only in post-Mao China. Similar questions are asked and the same doubts expressed in much of "post-Confucian" East Asia. In Singapore Lee Kuan-yew, the aging leader of probably the most spectacular effort at rapid industrialization in Asia, now fears the corrupting effects of secular liberalism on the traditional Confucian values and social discipline he considers essential ingredients of Singapore's success. Young Singaporeans, however, express deep reservations about Lee's authoritarian ways and fear any revival of Confucianism as a prelude to further political repression.

Likewise in Korea, regimes widely viewed as no less authoritarian than Lee's have seemed to promote Confucianism as a conservative force, while students and many intellectuals remain distrustful of it (to such an extent that even an official publication of the Korean Academy of Sciences, *An Introduction to Korean Studies*, reflects a critical view of Confucianism among many modern scholars and discounts its contributions to Korea's historical development). In Taiwan, even though more serious attention is paid to Confucianism as integral to China's cultural heritage, young people do not always share the same loyalty to it and seek reassurance that there is no essential conflict between it and modern life. Meanwhile in Japan Confucianism is widely believed to have played a profound, though subtle, role in Japan's rise to a dominant position in the world economy, yet in Ronald Dore's

new book, *Taking Japan Seriously: A Confucian Perspective on Leading Economic Issues*,<sup>1</sup> readers so far unpersuaded of it will have difficulty identifying in traditional terms what is specifically Confucian in the attitudes Dore describes among the Japanese.

In these circumstances it is probably a healthy thing that the official line in the People's Republic today speaks of "seeking truth through facts," by looking into what is both "good and bad" in Confucianism. Indeed, only a broad and open-minded approach to the subject will do. Yet if I still have difficulty with the questions, so often put to me, What do you think of Confucianism? or What are the strong and weak points of Confucianism? my reaction is not just the typical disinclination of the academician, or supposedly "disinterested scholar," to commit himself. Without objuring all value judgments I still feel obliged to ask: Whose Confucianism are we talking about? If it is the teachings of Confucius in the *Analects*, then almost nothing in Ronald Dore's book speaks to that, and the same, as a matter of fact, was already true of the anti-Confucian diatribes earlier in this century, which rarely spoke to Confucius's own views but only to later distortions of them. If it is the teaching of Confucius, plus those of the other classic thinkers (say, Mencius and Hsün-Tzu) that is meant, then even assuming one can identify the common denominator among those classical Confucians, on what ground do we stop there, disallowing the testimony of still later Confucians, like Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-ming, who have contributed to the development and amplification of the teaching? What purpose is served by freezing the definition at some moment far in the past, when what we want to know is something about the role of Confucianism just yesterday or today? Again, since the question, as we have it, is one raised all over East and Southeast Asia, the answer can take many forms: Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese as well as Chinese. Strictly speaking, we would have to consider in each such case how

<sup>1</sup> Stanford University Press, 1987.

Confucianism was understood and practiced —how it came to be transmitted, interpreted, accepted, and acted upon in this time and that place.

If in the face of such complications, I am still willing to attempt an answer to these questions, it is with the proviso that you indulge my choice of title, “The Trouble with Confucianism,” and accept its intended ambiguity with respect to the word “Trouble,” which is meant to include the different kinds of trouble Confucianism either fell into, made for itself, or created for others. In my view Confucianism was a problematical enterprise from its inception, and, as it responded to the challenges of each age, addressing some perhaps but not others, it had both its successes and its failures. Looked at in this way, the “good and bad points of Confucianism” actually tend to go together. We get nowhere by conceiving of them as fixed points in a static system. They are to be recognized, if at all, as mirroring each other in a convoluted historical process, as constants and continuities in the midst of discontinuities and difficulties.

Further, if we think of “trouble” as what was wrong or went wrong with Confucianism, our first consideration must be to ask ourselves, By whose standards? My answer is that any failure should, in the first instance, be judged by the standards and goals Confucians put before themselves. Simply to establish those criteria will be more of a task than most of us have so far realized, but it takes priority over any other historical judgment we might hope to render.

Finally, I should mention that among the topics to which Confucianism gave priority or special attention, one would have to include rulership and leadership, scholarship and the school, the family and human relations, rites and religion. I shall focus on the first, with lesser reference to the second. This, as it happened, was the order in which Confucius first addressed them.

## I. SAGE-KINGS AND NOBLE MEN

The trouble with Confucianism was there from the start, to become both a perennial challenge and a dilemma that would dog it through history —there in the founding myths of the tradition as the ideal of humane governance, and thereafter, even in Confucianism's movements of apparent worldly success, as the ungovernable reality of imperial rule. We encounter it first in the "Canon of Yao" in the classic *Book of Documents*, with this idealization of the sage-king:

Examining into antiquity, we find that the Emperor Yao was named Fang-hsun. He was reverent, intelligent, accomplished, sincere and mild. He was genuinely respectful and capable of all modesty. His light spread over the four extremities of the world, extending to Heaven above and Earth below. He was able to make bright his great virtue and bring affection to the nine branches of the family. When the nine branches of the family had become harmonious, he distinguished and honored the great clans. When the hundred clans had become illustrious, he harmonized the myriad states. Thus the numerous peoples were amply nourished, prospered, and became harmonious.<sup>2</sup>

No depth of insight is required to see embodied here in Yao all the civilized virtues of a good Confucian ruler; his reverent and respectful manner, his intelligence, his disciplined attainments, his self-restraint and modesty, his concern for others —all having a marvelous efficacy in the moral transformation of his people, all manifest in the beneficent power of his paternal care, radiating from the luminous center of his personal virtue, outward through successive degrees of kinship to distant states and the very ends of the world, harmonizing all mankind in one loving family and bringing them into a cosmic unity with Heaven and Earth.

<sup>2</sup> *Shu Ching*, Yao tien; translation modified from *The Shoo King*, trans. James Legge, Chinese Classics 3 (London, 1865), pp. 15–16.

Note, however, what is simply given, what is so naturally assumed in the presentation of this heroic ideal: its setting is altogether a human world, a familial order, with its patriarchal leader already in place and, what is more, already in place at the center. There is no creation myth here, no Genesis. Even as a founding myth, the Canon of Yao projects neither conquest nor struggle; neither antagonist nor rival to overcome nor any countervailing power to be met. The sage-king stands alone, unchallenged and unchecked except by self-imposed restraints. And in the sequel to this account of Yao's commanding virtue, the question is simply one of finding a worthy successor. There is nothing contested, nothing problematical except how to find another paragon of humble virtue to whom rulership may be entrusted.

All this, as I have said, may well be taken as a founding myth of the Confucians, emblematic of a school which thought of itself as the prime bearer and upholder of civilized tradition. Yet, the myth and the tradition were more than just Confucian. Before Confucius put his own stamp and seal on them, they were waiting for him in the record of China's primordial age. Much of the classic canon itself antedates Confucius, and others of the pre-Confucian texts celebrate the ideal of the sage-king, as does this passage from the *Book of Odes* eulogizing King Wen, a founder-father of the Chou dynasty, as bearer of Heaven's mandate:

King Wen is on high ;  
Oh, he shines in Heaven

. . . . .

August was King Wen  
Continuously bright and reverent.  
Great indeed was his mandate from Heaven.<sup>3</sup>

In Confucius's passing down of the *Odes* and other classics to later generations there is reason to credit what he says of himself

<sup>3</sup>*Shih ching*, Ta Ya, Wen Wang; translation modified from *The She King*, trans. James Legge, Chinese Classics 4 (London, 1871), pp. 427–29.



in the *Analects* —that he was a transmitter of tradition —even if we cannot accept at face value, but only as typical of his appealing modesty, the Master's further disclaimer that he was making any original contribution of his own to that tradition. In this case, the idea of the sage-king was Chinese before it became Confucian. Archaeological evidence confirms the suspicion that centralized rule and the dominance of a single ruler, combining religious and political authority, were already facts of historical life before Confucius came on the scene. That this centralized rule was already rationalized and bureaucratized to a high degree, as David Keightley's recent studies confirm, warrants the view that late-Shang-dynasty China already prefigured the characteristic imperial order of the Ch'in and Han in this important respect: a symmetrical structure of power, with varying degrees of control or autonomy at the outer reaches, but converging on a center of increasing density, though not always of heightened power, in terms of bureaucratic administration, economic control, and cultural affluence.<sup>4</sup> Though it is no doubt also true that this process of centralization emerged as a developing trend, was intensified, and became further rationalized in the late Chou period, such increasing concentration of power implies no radical discontinuity from the past. Even the so-called feudal order, or enfeoffment system, looked, at least in theory, to such a commissioning, if not commanding, center. As Hsü Cho-yün has characterized this "feudal order": "Kingship was at the center of a vast kinship organization, . . . coupled with a strong state structure."<sup>5</sup>

Testimony from the non-Confucian schools of the middle and late Chou period supports this conclusion. Different though they are among themselves in other respects, Mohists, Taoists, and Legalists (or for that matter even the different wings of the Con-

<sup>4</sup> David N. Keightley, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," in *History of Religions* 17 (1978): 211–25.

<sup>5</sup> Hsü Cho-yün, *The Western Chou Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), chapter 4.

fucian school) all alike assume that the original, natural, and normal order of things is a unified realm, with one ruler presiding over a single structure of authority, looser or tighter perhaps in one case or another but never multicentered. Even the political pluralism and cultural particularism cherished by the Taoists was something to be fostered by a sage-ruler rather than protected by a system of checks and balances or countervailing powers.

That this represents, even more than a Confucian attitude, a persistent proclivity of the larger Chinese tradition, is suggested too by its recrudescence even in the post-Confucian modern era. True, the worship of the great leader, the “cult of personality,” was no Chinese invention, nor should we look on the benign countenance of Mao Tse-tung, ubiquitously displayed in public to brighten the world with his genial visage, solely as an avatar of the Chinese sage-king. Yet by whom, even in the Soviet Union, was Mao’s mentor Stalin more apotheosized than by the unofficial poet laureate of Communist China, Kuo Mo-jo, when he celebrated Stalin’s seventieth birthday in 1949? Where else was the great leader so ecstatically acclaimed, not only as the fulfillment of all human aspiration, but even as playing a role of cosmic proportions :

The Great Stalin, our beloved “Steel,” our everlasting sun!

Only because there is you among mankind,

Marx-Leninism can reach its present heights!

Only because there is you, the Proletariat can have  
its present growth and strength!

Only because there is you, the task of liberation  
can be as glorious as it is!

It is you who are leading us to merge into the stream  
flowing into the ocean of utopia.

It is you who are instructing us that the West  
will never neglect the East.

It is you who are uniting us into a force  
never before seen in history. . . .

. . . . .

The history of mankind is opening a new chapter.

The orders of nature will also follow the direction  
of revolution.

The name of Stalin will forever be the sun of mankind.<sup>6</sup>

A writer, historian, and activist before 1949, Kuo became a supposedly “nonpartisan” representative in the People’s Political Consultative Conference and later vice-president of the Standing Committee of the People’s Congress. In this congratulatory hymn presumably he speaks for the Chinese people and celebrates their age-old undying faith in sage-rulers.

At any rate, to return to the earlier case, such evidence as we now have indicates that unified, centralized rule by a single, preponderant figure had become the established pattern very early in ancient China, and that for Confucius the king at the center was already a given, not something he originated or would propose to establish except on the classic model. What he did suggest was how the exercise of such power might be guided and restrained in a humane way, through the moralization of politics. So too it would be with later Confucians who, for the most part, made no attempt to seize power through the mobilization of armies or parties, or to found and organize a new regime. Rather they kept their peace and bided their time, waiting for the conqueror to come to them, meanwhile preparing themselves to deal with the same historical givens, the same recalcitrant facts of political life, through their study of the lessons of the past. When, then, opportunity arose, they would pursue through the same process of persuasion and moral transformation the taming of power and modi-

<sup>6</sup> As translated by Fang Chao-ying and privately circulated, 1949.

fication of existing structures. In such situations, this connate pairing —this ideal of sagely rule cohabiting with the actuality of autocratic power —remained both a supreme challenge for the Confucians and a source of endless trouble.

#### THE NOBLE MAN AS COUNTERPOINT TO THE SAGE-KING

In the ode to King Wen, part of which I quoted earlier, there is another stanza, addressed to the scions of the Chou house, which refers to the Shang dynasty's loss of Heaven's mandate to the Chou:

The charge is not easy to keep  
 May it not end in your persons.  
 Display and make bright your good fame  
 And consider what Yin [the Shang] had received  
     from Heaven [and then lost].  
 The moral burden of high Heaven  
 Is unwritten, unspoken.  
 Take King Wen as your model  
 And the people will trust in you.<sup>7</sup>

Here the power of the ruling house is subject to the intangible moral restraint which Heaven imposes as the unstated condition of the Chou's exercise of sovereignty. While King Wen stands as the model of such restraint, the moral burden falls on his house, his descendants, as a public and collective responsibility.

When, in the *Analects*, we encounter the same charge, it assumes a new form. The idea of power held in public trust is still there, but when Confucius talks about Heaven's mandate he does not address a ruling house, urging fidelity to the example of its founder as a condition of its longevity and tenure. Rather

<sup>7</sup> *Shih ching*, Ta Ya, Wen Wang; translation modified from Legge, *She King*, pp. 429–31.

the mandate has been reconceived as an individual mission and personal commitment to the service of humankind in the broadest sense. Confucius speaks of this to his students and companions as members of an educated elite with a high calling to leadership and public service, even when they hold no power. For them Heaven's imperative (*t'ien ming*) is no dynastic commission but a claim on their individual political and moral conscience.

By the same token or tally the sage-king as model for a dynasty has little direct relevance for Confucius and his followers, who, with the decline of the old aristocracy, are hardly in a position to emulate it. More pertinent is the example of the noble man (*chün-tzu*), who may now hold no office at all.<sup>8</sup> This is not for want of a vocation to public service but because, unlike the scions of the Chou in former times, the noble man may be politically displaced or unrecognized. Heaven may not have destined him for office or disposed of his personal circumstances so as to give him direct access to power or political influence.

Several passages in the *Analects* illustrate this conception of the noble man fulfilling his personal moral mission even in political adversity, simply by preserving his own self-respect and remaining true to his interior sense of what it is right and proper for him to do. In the opening lines he asks the question whether truly being a noble man does not mean remaining unsoured even if one is unknown or unrecognized (*Analects* 1). The normal expectation for the *chün-tzu* would be that he receive some recognition (i.e., position) from the ruler, yet Confucius pointedly subordinates the outward status (the political or social standing of the nobleman) to the inner nobility and peace of mind of the noble man. The one-time aristocrat, now "unknown" and politi-

<sup>8</sup> The Chinese term for "noble man" is not specific as to gender, and in later times *chün* could be applied to women as well. Thus a reading like "noble person" is not impossible. But I think in patriarchal times "noble man" is closer to the actual meaning, and "person" should be reserved for *shen*, "one's own person," and the respect it is entitled to.

cally a nobody, could make something of himself by becoming a truly noble man.

Confucius stresses the point again by speaking of the noble man as one who stands by his professed principles, his dedication to the True Way, no matter what the ignominious fate he may suffer. “He is never so harried, never so endangered, but that he cleaves to this” (*Analects* 4:5). This requires more than the courteous behavior of the gentleman. Uncompromising adherence to principle cannot be served simply by a nice diffidence or polite disengagement from human affairs. A life of continuing struggle may be called for. When it is suggested that Confucius abandon his efforts to reform rulers, he counters by asserting the need to persist even against the indifference of those in power. “If the Way prevailed in the world [i.e., simply of itself, without the need for conscientious effort on man’s part], I would not be trying to change things” (*Analects* 18:6).

Confucius had already been derided for “fleeing from this man and that” (i.e., avoiding service to one ruler or another), when, as he was advised, he would do better “to flee from this whole generation of men” (i.e., to give up on political reform altogether). His response was neither to give up nor to give in, neither to retire from the scene in order fastidiously to preserve his inner integrity, nor on the other hand, to accept whatever office might be available simply for the sake of keeping himself politically occupied and comfortably provided for. Rather, peripatetically on the political circuit of ancient China, Confucius traveled the twisting road that lay between easy accommodation and total withdrawal.

Given this example of Confucius and his portrayal of the noble man, one understands how later Confucians would have had to stray rather far from the Master’s precepts if they were to fit Max Weber’s characterization of the Confucian as a gentleman politely accommodating himself to the status quo or rationally

adjusting to the world in which he found himself.<sup>9</sup> True, the modest, respectful manner and careful prudential conduct expected of the Confucian *chün-tzu*, lend some plausibility to Weber's view. But if the Confucian is worldly and urbane in this respect, he, like Confucius, must heed the imperatives of Heaven as the supreme moral order in the universe, and answer to it in his conscience. "He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray" (*Analects* 3:3). In Confucius's account of his own life-experience, the ultimate meaning and value of his mission in life is bound up with "recognizing the imperatives of Heaven" and "learning to follow them" (*Analects* 2:4). "There are," he says, "three things of which the noble man stands in awe: the imperatives of Heaven, great men, and the words of the sages" (*Analects* 15:8). And finally, in the last lines of the *Analects*, Confucius says, "Unless one recognizes the imperatives of Heaven one cannot be a noble man (20:3).

It is this compelling voice of conscience and ideal standard represented by the imperatives of Heaven which serves as the ultimate criterion and court of judgment in assessing human affairs. If, according to the Confucian conception of humanity or humanness (*jen*), man can indeed be the measure of man, it is only because this high moral sense and cosmic dimension of the human mind-and-heart give it the capacity for self-transcendence. Likewise if the Confucian, even while accepting the world, still hopes to gain the leverage on it necessary for its transformation, Heaven's imperative in the minds of men serves as the fulcrum. So it is too with the stance of the noble man, standing on the same moral ground at court, hoping to transform the ruler.

Recognizing this potential transformative power in Confucian thought, the neo-Weberian sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt has amended Weber's characterization of Confucianism, calling it now, quite seriously though paradoxically, a "this-worldly tran-

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 227, 235.

scendentalism.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Eisenstadt acknowledges the tension between the given world and Heaven’s imperative, a tension expressed by Confucius when, ridiculed for his unrealism and still unwilling either to accommodate or abandon the ruler of his day, he insisted on the need both for himself and for them to make the Way prevail in the world.

In earlier work I have drawn attention to what I call the “prophetic voice” in the later Confucian tradition — in the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung dynasty and after — which challenged and judged severely the politics of the late imperial dynasties in China. Without intending any exact or entire equation of the Confucian noble voice with prophetic utterance in the more theistic traditions, wherein the prophet has often renounced the world and “gone out into the desert,” I wished to show that even a world-affirming Confucian could render severe judgments on the established order, asserting absolute claims on behalf of inner conscience. As I said of this distinction:

“Prophetic” I use here to indicate an extraordinary access to and revelation of truth not vouchsafed to everyone, which by some process of inner inspiration or solitary perception affords an insight beyond what is received in scripture, and by appeal to some higher order of truth gives new meaning, significance, and urgency to certain cultural values or scriptural texts. Confucian tradition does not customarily speak of such a revelation as “supernatural,” but it has an unpredictable, wondrous quality manifesting the divine creativity of Heaven. By contrast I use “scholastic” to represent an appeal to received authority by continuous transmission, with stress on external or public acceptance of it as the basis of its validity.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt, *This Worldly Transcendentalism and the Structuring of the World — Weber’s Religion of China and the Format of Chinese History and Civilization* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> W. T. de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 9.



Confucius is no Moses or Mohammed, conveying the direct words of a very personal God, but his critique appeals to the authority of high Heaven and invokes the ideal order of the sage-kings. Time does not allow for a full discussion of the classical antecedents of this prophetic function in Confucianism. The Neo-Confucians, however, drew particularly on the teachings of Mencius, and I should like briefly to point out his special contribution in asserting this prophetic role. Mencius, of course, is not simply a carbon copy—or perhaps I should say a rubbing from the graven tablets—of Confucius. He does, however, echo strongly the latter's views on Heaven, the ideal order of the sage-kings, and the role of the noble man in challenging the rulers of his day. Indeed Mencius heightened considerably the tension between the Confucian ideals of humanity (*jen*) and rightness (*i*), and, by contrast, the brutal politics of his time. Notwithstanding his affirmation of the essential goodness of human nature, he was quick to expose the faults of contemporary rulers—their callousness, selfishness, pretentiousness, and even their minor failings. Nothing short of a scrupulous adherence to the Way was demanded. Even the sacrifice of one's life itself was not too much to ask of those who would live up to the full measure of their humanity (*Mencius* 6A:10). For himself, Mencius insisted that even the gaining of power over the whole world would not justify killing one man or committing a single act of unrighteousness to accomplish it (*Mencius* 2A:2). And of the noble man he said that among his three greatest pleasures in life to rule the world would not be one of them (the three are that his parents still be alive and his brothers well, that he feel no shame over his own conduct, and that he have able students; *Mencius* 7A:20).

By no means the last Confucian to speak in these idealistic terms, Mencius was probably the first to express realistically what would be required of ministers who sought to convey the Confucian message to rulers. No one has exposed more forthrightly than he the danger of co-optation that lay in the ruler-minister rela-

tion or the seductive ease with which officials could fall into the obsequiousness of servitors or slaves, awed by autocratic power. Like Confucius, he distinguished between true nobility, identified with moral and intellectual worth, and the superficialities of worldly rank. The former he called the “nobility of Heaven” (*t’ien-chueh*), again identifying high moral standards with Heaven. Worldly rank he termed the “nobility of men,” empty and ephemeral unless grounded in man’s inborn moral sense and reflective of a hierarchy of true values (*Mencius* 6A:16). No one inveighed so fearlessly as Mencius against the pretensions of power and prestige (though admittedly this could be seen as more the fearlessness of the teacher in a classroom than that of the minister at court or the soldier in battle).

Those who counsel the great should view them with contempt and not have regard for their pomp and display. Lofty halls with great beams —these, even if successful, I would not have. Quantities of food, hundreds of girls in attendance —these, even if successful, I would not have. . . . What they (princes) have, is nothing I would have. What I would have is the restraints and regulations of the ancients. Why should I stand in awe of princes? (*Mencius* 7B: 34)

And of the ruler’s treatment of the *chün-tzu* at court, Mencius said:

To feed him and not love him is to treat him as a pig. To love him and not respect him is to treat him as a domesticated animal. Respect must come before gifts. Respect not substantiated in action can only be taken by the noble man as an empty gesture. (*Mencius* 7A:37)

In this way Mencius attempted to invest the Confucian noble man as minister and official with the privileged position necessary for him to serve as independent counsel, and thus provide a counterpoint to the dictates of the ruler. His vision was of a regime no less unitary than that attributed to the sage-kings, whose ideal

order he too evoked, but Mencius could conceive of a center that did not arrogate all power to itself, balanced by an autonomous feudal nobility and ministered to by truly noble men, exercising this independent prophetic function as a counterweight to the concentration of power and wealth in the ruler.

After Mencius had so asserted the dignity and independence of the minister, Chinese rulers who still claimed the authority, omniscience, and omnicompetence of the sage could not expect that claim to go undisputed by the Confucians. Though officially unrecognized and politically powerless against the highly organized and efficient Legalists, who succeeded in conquering, unifying, and reorganizing China in the third century B.C., the Confucians' influence was nonetheless acknowledged by the Legalist prime minister of the Ch'in empire, Li Ssu, who called for the burning of the Confucian books and directed those seeking an education to get their instruction from official sources, not from impractically bookish and yet ideologically troublesome Confucians who "harp on the past to injure the present." In a memorial to the throne, Li accused the Confucians of promoting open criticism and expressing views contrary to the ruler's. He recommended that "Those who dare to talk to each other about the *Book of Odes* and *Book of Documents* should be executed and their bodies exposed in the market place. Anyone referring to the past to criticize the present should, with all the members of his family, be put to death."<sup>12</sup>

Even allowing for the alacrity and frequency with which Legalists of Li Ssu's stripe resorted to extreme punishments, one may infer from the drastic measures he proposed that, to his mind, the Confucians represented a veritable threat. Despite their antiquarian and pedantic ways, Li speaks of them as having influence with the multitudes and stirring up opposition. This, in his eyes, cannot but jeopardize the authority of the emperor, who, Li says,

<sup>12</sup> *Shih Chi* PNP 6:23b; *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 1:141.

has reunified the empire after its earlier disintegration, brought all thought and activity under his own direction and dictation, and “established for himself a position of sole supremacy.”<sup>13</sup>

Apparently these Confucian traditionalists, punctilious pedants though they appeared to be, were more than just gentlemen scholars and courtly ritualists in the Weberian mold, but noble men of the type Mencius called for: critics whose protest could be quite telling. Plainly, if self-proclaimed sage-rulers meant trouble for the Confucians, the trouble with Confucianism for the ruler could be found in the noble man.

#### THE TROUBLE WITH CONFUCIAN SCHOLARSHIP

When Confucianism finally emerged as a state-sanctioned teaching, with official status at court, it was in the reign of the great Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. Tung Chung-shu (179?-104? B.C.), a leading scholarly authority on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* who might best be described as a philosopher of history, was also a leading figure at court, recognized as such by the Confucian scholars of his time and especially respected for his character and integrity. Tung had definite views about political and economic reform, and in advocating them recalled both the ideal order of the sage-kings and the principles of Mencius. Arguably as a proponent of such ideals and critic of the Ch'in-Han system he could be considered a political prophet, but that may be going too far. Though he believed in the equalization of landholding and hoped for a return to the ancient well-fields system advocated by Mencius, in the end Tung felt the need to compromise with the established order, settling in his own mind for a moderate limitation on landholding rather than insisting on radical redistribution. By Mencius's criteria, as conscientious statesman and reformer Tung might well merit the title “noble man,”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

but as the embodiment equally of Confucian courage and prudence, and as quintessential classicist and philosopher, he was unlikely to press his case with the shrill or stern voice of the prophet.

Officially Tung and his Han Confucian colleagues were honored at court as erudite scholars and professors of the classics, but as the Emperor Wu turned increasingly to professional bureaucrats —technicians and fiscal experts identified with Legalist methods —for the management of his finances and imposition of expanded state controls over the economy, the Confucians arose in opposition. Things came to a head in 81 B.C. with the historic Debate on Salt and Iron (so-called because it centered on the issue of state monopolies over these essential resources).

Significantly, however, the debate departed from the familiar Confucian-Legalist contest over the primacy of state power. Rather than assuming state supremacy as the highest value (as had Li Ssu earlier), here the supposedly “Legalist” types argued that their policies primarily served the people’s interest, that is, promoted the public development, fair distribution, or conservation of limited resources, instead of allowing uncontrolled private exploitation. Confucian spokesmen, basing themselves on Mencius, contended that this economic function was better left in the hands of the “people” themselves, that is, better in private hands (what today might be called free-enterprise) than those of the state bureaucracy.

Which party, then, could really speak for the “people’s” interest? We may not be in a position to arrive at a definitive judgment, but *two* points are worth noting. The first is that in the debate itself, the government experts belittled the Confucians as poor, threadbare, impractical scholars, incompetent to handle their own affairs, let alone those of the state. The imperial secretary is recorded as saying of the Confucians: “See them now present with nothing and consider it substance, with emptiness and call it plenty! In their coarse gowns and cheap sandals they walk gravely along sunk in meditation as though they had lost

something. These are not men who can do great deeds and win fame. They do not even rise above the vulgar masses!"<sup>14</sup>

This diatribe perpetuates the long-standing reputation of the Confucians as straitlaced but impecunious scholars, not at all men of the world or well adjusted to it but almost misfits. Here we need a word for them that conveys their sense of mission and disciplined, even if arcane, lifestyle. "Academician" (especially when thought of in cap and gown) might do and is certainly closer to it than "preacher" or "prophet," yet Confucians professed a greater dedication to defined moral values than we customarily associate with the "value-free" academics of today. In any case the distinguishing characteristic of the Confucians, in the eyes of their contemporaries, is their cultural commitment, self-denying dedication, and shared values as a company of scholars, rather than any economic class interest, proprietary power, party organization, or entrenched social position.

The second point worth noting is that the great debate was won ostensibly by the Confucians but practically by elements in the inner court surrounding the imperial family, who exploited the rhetoric of the Confucians to advance their own interests in a power struggle with the dominant faction in the regular state (i.e., civil) administration. Once in power themselves, the latter largely dispensed with the Confucians and made their own compromise with the established revenue-raising agencies, which, though somewhat curbed, remained essentially intact.<sup>15</sup>

The actual weakness of the Confucians then, seems not to have lain in a failure of advocacy, but in their indisposition or inability to establish any power base of their own. They could serve important functions for the bureaucratic state, by virtue of their literacy, their knowledge of history and ritual, and their high-minded ethos, but except on rare, momentary occasions, they faced

<sup>14</sup> *Yen t'ieh lun*, sec. 19, 4:10b; *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1:223.

<sup>15</sup> Nishijima Sadao, "Butei no shi: Entetsuron no haikai," in *Kodaishi koza* (Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1965).

the state, and whoever controlled it, as individual scholars unsupported by any organized party or active constituency. It is this institutional weakness, highly dependent condition, and extreme insecurity in their tenure of office (correctly diagnosed by Weber), and not any failure to uphold transcendent values (since they were hard enough on, demanding enough of, themselves), that marked the Confucians as *ju* (“softies”) in the politics of imperial China.

In the mature dynasties, with the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Sung dynasty and after, the literati acquired an even stronger identity as bearers of high culture and transcendental values but did not succeed in overcoming this crucial handicap. Even when Neo-Confucianism became firmly established as official doctrine, with a key role in both education and the civil service examination system, Confucian scholar/officials remained exposed to the vicissitudes of a system that took advantage of their disciplined talents while keeping them in a condition of extreme dependency and insecurity — though whether in servitude or not is another matter.

The pathos of this situation for the conscientious Confucian — mindful of Confucius’s own persistent sense of mission, and refusing, in the face of extreme difficulties, either to give up or give in — had been touchingly expressed by the great T’ang poet Tu Fu (712-70), as he struggled to carry on his own political vocation when out of office and almost had to go begging for help from friends in different parts of the country. Here are two poems written in his last years:

#### EARLY SAILING

Every quest is preceded by a hundred scruples; Confucianism is indeed one of my troubles! And yet, because of it, I have many friends. And despite my age, I have continued to travel. . . .

Wise men of ancient times would not expose themselves to any chance of danger; Why should we hurry now at the risk of our lives? . . .

Having come a long and hard way to be a guest; One can make few appeals without injuring one's self-respect. Among the ancients, there were good men who refused to compromise and starved to death; There were able men who humored the world and received rich gifts. These are mutually exclusive examples; The trouble with me is that I want to follow them both!<sup>16</sup>

ON THE RIVER

On the river, every day these heavy rains —  
bleak, bleak, autumn in Ching-ch'u!  
High winds strip the leaves from the trees;  
through the long night I hug my fur robe.  
I recall my official record, keep looking in the mirror,  
recall my comings and goings, leaning alone in an upper room.  
In these perilous times I long to serve my sovereign —  
old and feeble as I am, I can't stop thinking of it!<sup>17</sup>

So much for the noble man in T'ang China. Can we call him a failure? Politically yes, Tu Fu was a failure, but humanly speaking?

In the later period let me cite two early Ming emperors as typical of the relationship between Confucianism and the dynastic system. The founder Ming T'ai-tsu (1368–99) confirmed the important role of Confucian scholars in the civil bureaucracy by resuming the civil service examinations, based on the Neo-Confucian curriculum of Chu Hsi, which the Yüan dynasty had first adopted in 1313–15. Indeed T'ai-tsu strengthened the system by allowing almost no access to office except through this meritocratic route. On the other hand, as a man of humble origins and largely self-educated, he showed considerable distaste for Neo-

<sup>16</sup> William Hung, *Tu Fu; China's Greatest Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 266.

<sup>17</sup> Burton Watson, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 234.



Confucian scholarship and philosophy as such, making plain his preference for men who combined literacy with practical learning, in contrast to Neo-Confucians, distinguished by their literary refinements and philosophical sophistication.

A ruthless despot in dealing with ministers he came to distrust, his megalomania led T'ai-tsu to abolish the prime ministership in order to centralize and concentrate all executive power in his own hands, while also, through a series of imperial pronouncements and directives, he exercised supreme ideological authority in matters of moral, social, and political doctrine.<sup>18</sup> It will not surprise my readers to learn that, even while giving the Four Books their greatest prominence in education and the examination system, T'ai-tsu saw to it that the text of Mencius was expurgated so as to remove from it passages considered contumacious or subversive of the ruler's supreme authority.

The third Ming emperor, Cheng-tsu (r. 1402–25), a usurper of the throne, was no less assertive of imperial authority and ruthless in dealing with his ministers. To enhance his legitimacy, he made a great show of patronizing Neo-Confucianism, even though outspoken ministers (loyal in the Confucian sense of giving the ruler honest advice) were subjected by him to terror, imprisonment, torture, and death. At Ch'eng-tsu's direction a massive compilation of Neo-Confucian texts was printed and officially promulgated in 1415, to become the authoritative canon of Neo-Confucian teaching for centuries —in Ming China, in Yi dynasty Korea and Tokugawa Japan. Ch'eng-tsu also compiled and had published in his own name a guide to self-cultivation and mind control identified as the “learning of the sages.” This latter work had far less influence, no doubt because Ch'eng-tsu's presumptuousness in claiming to speak as a sage did not impress later generations. On the contrary the Ch'ing dynasty editors of the Imperial Manuscript Library Catalogue later castigated Ch'eng-tsu for this pre-

<sup>18</sup> See my *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, p. 158.

sumption, when more properly he should, as the ruling authority, simply have authorized and given his imprimatur to what more competent scholarly authorities had been asked to prepare. As I have summarized this scholarly judgment elsewhere, the editors said of Ch'eng-tsu that "he showed no sense of modesty or shame." They note the blood spilled in his rise to power, the harshness of his rule, the many who suffered unjustly from his arbitrary decrees and excessive punishments, all in contrast to the benevolent professions of the work in question. They conclude: "Men of later generations would not be taken in by this hypocrisy."<sup>19</sup>

There is great irony in the Ming situation considering that it was in a real sense *the* first full "Neo-Confucian" period —the first in which nearly all educated men, from the beginning, received their intellectual and moral formation through Neo-Confucian teachers and a Neo-Confucian curriculum. Neo-Confucian texts served as the basis for state examinations, and even Ming emperors, whether as crown princes or after, were constantly lectured to by Neo-Confucian mentors. Yet by the almost unanimous verdict of historians, Ming rule has been adjudged the ultimate extreme in Chinese despotism. Lest one dismiss this as just a Western judgment, prejudiced perhaps by ignorance, cultural preconceptions, or a predisposition to denigrate the Chinese, it must be said that Chinese scholars themselves, by the end of the Ming, had already arrived at this condemnation.

Modern writers have sometimes explained this ironic outcome as an indication that Neo-Confucianism itself was to blame, that it bore the seeds of such despotism in its own "dogmatism" and authoritarian ways. Still others who find Neo-Confucians to blame do so for almost opposite reasons, citing their impractical idealism, naive optimism, and simple moralistic approach to politics that was altogether incapable of coping with the economic complica-

<sup>19</sup> De Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, p. 164.

tions and Byzantine complexities of imperial politics.<sup>20</sup> This latter explanation may be closer to the truth than the former, in that Neo-Confucian self-cultivation —the heart of its educational doctrine —put such heavy emphasis on the power of the individual moral will to master any situation. When, then, his ministers and mentors, with all the best intentions, seemed to lodge in the emperor ultimate responsibility for whatever went wrong in the world as the very necessary implication and consequence of imperial claims to absolute authority, it was an unbearable moral burden for the man at the top —“the one man” —to bear. There are signs that Ming rulers developed deep psychological resistance to this unequal situation, resenting being lectured to in such terms, and in some cases refused even to meet with their Neo-Confucian ministers for long periods of time —even years on end.<sup>21</sup> A strikingly similar syndrome appeared in Yi dynasty Korea, where the same system of Neo-Confucian instruction for the ruler was adopted, sometimes with incongruous results.<sup>22</sup>

Thomas Metzger’s theory that Neo-Confucian doctrine inevitably placed its adherents in a kind of ultimate “predicament” is particularly applicable here,<sup>23</sup> yet more applicable to the ruler than to the minister, since the latter could ease his Confucian conscience and extricate himself from this psychological dilemma by noting the disjointed times and likening himself to Confucius’s noble man, who “remains unsoured even though unrecognized.” Though he might take the ritual blame at court, the scholar/

<sup>20</sup> This is a recurring theme in Ray Huang’s *1587 — A Year of No Significance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> See Charles O. Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 42–45; L. C. Goodrich and C. Y. Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 308–11.

<sup>22</sup> See Ja-Hyun Kim Haboush, “The Education of the Yi Crown Prince: A Study in Korean Pedagogy,” in de Bary and Haboush, eds., *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament, Neo-Confucianism, and China’s Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

minister could reassure himself that even the Sage, Confucius, had had to struggle on in adverse circumstances, and political frustration was not necessarily a sign of moral failure. The ruler, however, had no one to blame but himself. Though the historical situations are not quite parallel, his “predicament” bears some resemblance to that of the emperor of Japan at the end of World War II, when he was glad to renounce any claims to “divinity,” since he found it a rather “uncomfortable” position to be in, as well as an impossible role to fulfill.<sup>24</sup>

Neo-Confucian historians, though, saw more in this situation than simply a test of individual moral wills. Huang Tsung-hsi (1610–95) and Ku Yen-wu (1613–82) wrote searching critiques of the dynastic institutions which placed so many conscientious Confucians in seemingly hopeless predicaments — situations wherein even the most extraordinary heroism and self-sacrifice could do little to overcome the inherent defects in such a flawed system, or cope, as I said at the outset, with the “ungovernability of imperial rule” by supposed sage-rulers. Reassessing the prime Neo-Confucian political dictum that self-cultivation (self-discipline) was the key to the governance of men (*hsiu-chi chih-jen*), Huang, as I pointed out in *The Liberal Tradition in China*, insisted that without the right laws and institutions it was almost impossible for the individual to do right.<sup>25</sup> Only with a proper governmental system could men be properly governed (*Yuchih fa erh hou yu chih jen*). Nor were these wholly exceptional views, expressed only by a few nonconformists. There is much evidence, increasingly being brought to light in recent studies, that such views were indeed shared among seventeenth-century scholars, deeply shaken

<sup>24</sup> As recorded in 1945 by Maeda Tamon, minister of education, who played an important role in drafting the rescript of January 1, 1946, whereby the Showa emperor renounced his divinity.

<sup>25</sup> W. T. de Bary, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983), p. 84.

by the catastrophic consequences of Ming despotism in both its violent excesses and dire deficiencies.<sup>26</sup>

As I conclude this portion of my discussion, we still face in seventeenth-century China the same tension we started with between Confucian ideals and Chinese imperial rule. This may well leave one with the strong impression of a standoff between the two. Without trying to reverse that impression, I would at this point only caution against viewing the “standoff” as a complete stalemate. Western history exhibits more motion, development, and seeming progress than does Chinese, but if we are truly concerned to get a new perspective on human value issues, on a global scale and in their full depth and complexity, we must also learn to look at them with Chinese eyes, and with something of the patience and longanimity of the Chinese. It is with this thought that I propose to extend the discussion into the nineteenth century, when the seemingly static tensions we have observed so far are forced into direct and explosive confrontation with the expansive drives of the West.

## II. *AUTOCRACY AND THE PROPHETIC ROLE IN ORTHODOX NEO-CONFUCIANISM*

In *The Liberal Tradition in China* I chose to start, not deductively from a preconceived Western definition of liberalism, but inductively from examples in Sung and Ming Neo-Confucianism that might reasonably be thought “liberal” by ordinary understandings of the term. Together, for me they represented a distinctive Chinese phenomenon, expressed in Chinese terms and to be understood in a Chinese context—by no means the exact equivalent of modern Western “liberalism.” On this basis various forms of “liberal” criticism or protest in China might be defined positively, in terms of the ideal standards they tried to uphold,

<sup>26</sup> Lynn Struve, “Huang Zongxi in Context,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (August 1988).

but also negatively, by what they opposed. Thus Chinese liberalism was conditioned significantly by Chinese despotism, as it was also delimited by it. Acts of heroic protest, such as, for instance, Fang Hsiao-ju's self-sacrifice in resisting the usurpation and oppression of Ming Ch'eng-tsu (the Yung-lo emperor, 1403–24) or Hai Jui's excoriation of Ming Shih-tsung's incompetence and corruption in the Chia-ching (1522–66) period, would not have been evoked had not the consciences of these Confucian ministers first been aroused and then put to the ultimate test by their rulers. For Confucius, self-sacrifice was nothing to be sought after; endurance and survival were preferable to martyrdom (*Analects* 15:7). Thus, had it not been for Chinese despots, who first called forth the noble man and then tried to silence him, there would have been few Confucian martyrs.

But if autocracy in China both bred and stunted its own kind of liberal protest, it is noteworthy that these critics, prophets, and martyrs mostly came from among the Confucians—and in the cases just cited, specifically from the ranks of orthodox Neo-Confucians—not from among Buddhists or Taoists. The latter were, as we say, out of it, not engaged in the kind of struggle religion waged against Caesar in the West. In this respect Confucianism—not a teaching usually considered “religious”—performed the critical function Max Weber assigned to religion as the effective bearer of commanding, transcendental values in vital tension with the world, while Buddhism and Taoism, normally considered “religions,” rarely did so.

Robert Bellah once said, “Every religion tries to remake the world in its own image, but is always to some extent remade in the image of the world.”<sup>27</sup> This is true of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism as well, but how they are remade reflects also the extent to which, and the manner in which, they themselves actually

<sup>27</sup> Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), pp. 196–97.

try to remake the world. In the case we have here it is a question whether they even *tried* in the way Confucianism did.

No doubt some readers, recalling certain messianic movements and peasant rebellions in China, often of Buddhist or Taoist inspiration, will ask if these religions did not represent some revolutionary potential. Professor Eisenstadt, for his part, would explain these movements as failing in political effectiveness or transformative power mainly on account of extrinsic factors —the ability of the state to deny them any purchase on central ground, to hold them off and contain them at the periphery of power. Thus marginalized, they could exert no leverage on the political world.<sup>28</sup>

However this may be, it is also true that the state rarely had to contend with more than an ephemeral challenge from these religions, inasmuch as they failed to generate any systematic political doctrine, ideology of power, or set of principles on which to ground an organizational ethos. For them the failure to mount a serious challenge at the center was more a matter of default than of actual defeat or containment. In the West Stalin is said to have dismissed Roman Catholicism as a force to be reckoned with by asking, “How many divisions has the Pope?” In China, Buddhist and Taoist messianism, even though capable of rousing rebellions, could be discounted as viable political forces by asking the opposite question, Where is their alternative to the civil service?

If, then, we see both the imperial bureaucratic tradition and its liberal critics in Ming China as somehow joined in association with Neo-Confucianism, what later became of this uneasy combination and troubled union? Did Confucian scholars cease to offer a challenge to the state in the succeeding Manchu dynasty? Did the prophetic function lapse with the rise of a new and more efficient autocracy? Was Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, as reaffirmed by the Ch'ing, somehow decontaminated, rendered sterile of such self-criticism and protest? And if this vital challenge were miss-

<sup>28</sup> Eisenstadt, *This Worldly Transcendentalism*, pp. 55–57, 66–70.

ing, without it did Chinese civilization find its further growth stalemated, lacking the stimulus of prophecy and the goad of criticism? Did China, for want of such, develop an inertia or fall into a torpor from which it could only be roused by the more dynamic, transformative power of the West?

In at least partial answer to these questions, I should like here to offer two examples, drawn from the heart of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, which demonstrate that the essential tension between ideal and reality was sustained, and that, at least in the realm of ideas, there remained the possibility of a radical critique of the established order being generated from within the tradition, drawing on the same concepts, transcendent values, and prophetic utterances as in the past. Moreover both of the scholars I shall cite, though largely neglected in histories of Ch'ing thought, were recognized in their own time as leading spokesmen for Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, not just minor exceptions or dissidents without real influence. The failure of recent scholarship to take them into account when theorizing about Neo-Confucianism shows how the modern mentality can wear blinders at least as narrowing as those of the supposedly blind orthodoxies of the past.

#### LÜ LIU-LIANG AS AN ORTHODOX NEO-CONFUCIAN RADICAL

In the early years of this century Lu Liu-liang (1629–83) was known primarily as a Ming loyalist who refused to serve the Manchus and yet was also a leader in the revival of Chu Hsi's teachings in the early Ch'ing period. There was nothing implausible about this combination of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and dynastic loyalty, but in the revolutionary ferment at the end of the Ch'ing period it is understandable that Lu's anti-Manchu sentiments would have attracted more attention than his Neo-Confucian convictions. The latter, however, included radical political ideas akin to those of his better-known contemporary Huang Tsung-hsi (1610–95).



Lü's views, parallel to Huang's at many points, are embedded in his recorded dialogues and commentaries on the Four Books, widely circulated in his own day on account of their usefulness to examination candidates, but later suppressed by the Yung-cheng emperor as a consequence of the Tseng Ching case (1728). What is particularly intriguing about Lü is that he had resigned as an official stipendiary, refusing to serve under the Manchus, but made a living writing, printing, and selling model examination essays, along with his commentaries. In this way Lü took advantage of the very system he repudiated in order to reach an audience whose political ambitions and utilitarian motives would lead them to study him. There, embedded in his commentaries on the Four Books (the *Great Learning*, *Mean*, the *Analects*, and *Mencius*), one finds his radical political views.

Like many of his Sung predecessors, Lü was a "restorationist" who tended to reject existing dynastic institutions as flawed and corrupt in comparison to those of high antiquity. Hence not only was his stance far from conservative of the status quo, it was no less than radical in its attack on the established order: for example, on the dynastic system, hereditary monarchy, the state bureaucracy, the corruption of ministership, the land and tax system, the lack of a universal school system, laws that violate basic principles rooted in human nature, and a failure to encourage the people's participation in government.

Time does not suffice for me to elaborate on this summation of Lu's critique of dynastic rule, but as a historical postscript I should like to note that about midway through the Yung-cheng reign, in 1728–29, a revolt broke out against the dynasty. Though the rebellion was quickly put down, its leader, the aforementioned Tseng Ching, confessed to having been inspired by the antidynastic views of Lii Liu-liang. The fact that Lii had been a major influence on Lu Lung-ch'i (1630–93), himself revered as a beacon of strict Chu Hsi orthodoxy in the early Ch'ing, did not mitigate the offense. At this juncture the emperor had Lü Liu-liang punished

posthumously and with a vindictive thoroughness. His remains were dug up and exposed to desecration, his family survivors punished, his writings proscribed, and numerous favorable references to him in the works of Lu Lung-ch'i expurgated.<sup>29</sup>

FANG TUNG-SHU, A PROPHETIC VOICE  
IN THE EARLY MODERN AGE

During the early Ch'ing period, thanks to the efforts of Lü Liu-liang and Lu Lung-ch'i, the Ch'eng-Chu teaching emerged as something more than just an examination orthodoxy; it grew into an active intellectual force both in and out of court. Meanwhile alongside it a new movement developed, the so-called Han learning, or school of evidential research, which rode the same wave of conservative reaction against alleged Ming subjectivism and libertarianism, but also drew from both Ch'eng-Chu and Wang Yang-ming schools new developments in critical historical and textual scholarship. These enabled the Han learning increasingly to assert its own independence, at which point, as the new learning came to stand side by side with the established orthodoxy, an uneasy coexistence ensued. The latter remained well established in education and the examination system, while the influence of the new criticism was exerted mainly in the field of advanced scholarly research. In both of these spheres the developing contest between them cut across official and nonofficial lines.

Intellectually speaking, the influence of the school of evidential research had, by the eighteenth century, become so dominant that Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, in his *Intellectual Trends in the Ch'ing Period* (*Ch'ing-tai hsüeh-shu kai-lun*), would later describe this Han learning, which "carried on empirical research for the sake of empirical research and studied classics for the sake of classics,"

<sup>29</sup> Wm. Theodore de Bary, *East Asian Civilizations: A Dialogue in Five Stages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 65–66.

as the “orthodox school.”<sup>30</sup> This may be too simple a characterization of the evidential learning, but Liang’s reference to it as the “orthodox school” is symptomatic. That there could be such a new intellectual “orthodoxy” coexisting with an older Ch’eng-Chu orthodoxy in education, as if in some symbiotic relationship, tells us that even the mature Confucian tradition was far from simple and fixed but generated contending forces on more than one level at a time.

Toward the end of the Ch’ing period, however, the Han learning had long been entrenched in scholarly circles, as well as among their patrons in high Ch’ing officialdom, and in the early nineteenth century a powerful challenge came from the rear guard of Ch’eng-Chu orthodoxy in the writings of Fang Tung-shu (1772–1851). A sharp controversialist himself, Fang has also been seen as a highly controversial figure by intellectual historians, recognized as perhaps the most articulate spokesman for the Ch’eng-Chu school in his time. Liang Ch’i-ch’ao said of Fang’s treatise *Reckoning with the Han Learning* (*Han-hsüeh shang-tui*) (1824) that “its courage in opposing (the ‘orthodox’ school) made it a kind of revolutionary work.”<sup>31</sup> Other modern writers like Hu Shih, by contrast, have seen Fang as leading a last reactionary outburst against the Han learning on behalf of the decadent remnants of Neo-Confucianism, defending their sacred textual ground against the higher criticism.<sup>32</sup>

Fang came from a family of scholars identified with the T’ung-ch’eng school, which had attempted to revive the prose style and thought of the neoclassical movement in the Sung dynasty, represented in literature by Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–72) and in philosophy by Chu Hsi. Fang had little success in rising through the examination system and spent most of his life as an impecunious tutor in

<sup>30</sup> Trans. Immanuel Hsü (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Liang, *Intellectual Trends*, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> Hu Shih, *Tai Tung-yuan ti che-hsüeh* (Peking: Jen-jen wen-ku 1926), p. 175.

private homes, lecturer in local academies, and scholarly aide to high officials. If this suggests an insecure, marginal existence on the edge of the literocratic elite, such a dependent condition, economically speaking, in no way inhibited Fang's independence as a scholar and thinker. His outspoken views commanded attention, if not always assent. Fearless in challenging eminent scholars and high officials alike, he faulted the former for their scholarly errors and philosophical bankruptcy, the latter for the inadequacies of China's foreign policy and national defense.

One of the most frequent targets of Fang's criticism, Juan Yuan (1764–1849), was a highly respected scholar of the Han learning, senior official, and governor-general of Kuangtung and Kwangsi, whose policies Fang openly censured even while his livelihood as a scholar depended on Juan's patronage of a major scholarly project in 1821–22. That Fang could speak so boldly, despite his low status, is an indication of the high regard in which his scholarship and opinions were held. Indeed the breadth and depth of his scholarship were most impressive. Contrary to the view of earlier twentieth-century scholars that the T'ung-ch'eng school was characterized by a "bigotry . . . which limited [the school] to the study of Chu Hsi's commentaries and to the prose-writing of a few men, branding other types of literature as harmful to the mind,"<sup>33</sup> Fang's learning actually stands as testimony to the Chu Hsi school's pursuit of "broad learning." This extended to the in-depth study of all the major schools of Chinese thought, including Buddhism, Taoism, and —even more rare— some ventures into Japanese *kangaku* scholarship. While the same might equally be said of an eclectic scholar-dilettante, Fang's

<sup>33</sup> So characterized in Fang Chao-ying's biography of Fang Pao in A. W. Hurnmel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1943), 1:237. Fang Chao-ying was himself an excellent historian, and it was no particular prejudice of his but rather the common assumption of his "emancipated" generation that he gave vent to in such an opinion.

seriousness as a scholar is attested by the notably analytic and penetrating critiques he made of other thinkers and schools.<sup>34</sup>

Fang is best known, however, for his *Reckoning with the Han Learning*,<sup>35</sup> which features a detailed list of charges against scholars of the evidential research movement, giving point-by-point rebuttals.

A major theme of the *Reckoning* is the continuing debate over the Han learning's primary concern with evidential research in historical linguistics and text criticism, on the one hand, and the primacy of moral principles among orthodox Neo-Confucians, on the other.<sup>36</sup> Fang's objection to the former is on grounds of priority, not principle. Philology and phonology have for him a genuine instrumental value but, however sophisticated in technique, still no more than that. They are among the language skills which, according to the classical definition, had been treated as "elementary learning" (*hsiao-hsüeh*) preparatory to the higher studies discussed in the *Great Learning*. Indeed, by Fang's time *hsiao-hsueh* had come to have the secondary meaning of "philology." Yet from his point of view the top priority given to philology by the Han learning has stood things on their head. Scholarly specialization has taken to the solving of philological puzzles and antiquarian conundrums rather than to dealing with the larger human issues of self-cultivation, order in the family, disorder in the state, and peace in the world—all involving moral principles and thus, for Fang, the moral mind.<sup>37</sup> Fang pays special tribute

<sup>34</sup> As shown, for instance, in Fang's extensive critique of Huang Tsung-hsi's *Nan-lei wen-ting* (*T'ung-ch'eng Fang Chih-chih hsien-sheng ch'ian-chi*, Kuang-hsü ed., fasc. 42) or his discussion of Buddhism in *Hsiang-kuo wei-yen* (fasc. 34, 35, 36), as well as in the *Han hsüeh shang-tui* itself.

<sup>35</sup> Fang Tung-shu, *Han-hsüeh shang-tui*, Che-chiang shu-chu ed., 1840 (hereafter abbreviated *Shang-tui*).

<sup>36</sup> Fang underscores this in his preface to the *Shang-tui*, *Ib.* As a major issue in Ch'ing thought, the subject is more fully dealt with in Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>37</sup> As excerpted in *Shushigaku taikei* (Tokyo: Meitoku shuppansha, 1974), 11:427a (291).

to his forebear Fang Pao (1668–1749), an early leader of the T'ung-ch'eng school, who had evoked the reformist spirit of the northern Sung scholars with their primary concern for the larger meaning (*ta-i*) or general sense of the classics.<sup>38</sup> In this there is a notable resemblance also to Lü Liu-liang.

Fang too has his own prophetic warning and message to convey. This involves an aspect of his thought much discussed in the final chapter of his *Reckoning*, but rarely noted if at all by modern writers: the importance to him of human discourse and open discussion (*chiang-hsüeh*) as means of advancing the Way. *Chiang-hsueh* had often been translated as “lecturing,” and it may be that in later times *chiang-hsueh* had become so routine as to approximate mere lecturing. But there is another term *chiang-i* (*kōgi* in Japanese) more often used for formal lectures in both Chu Hsi's time and Fang's, and Chu himself made some distinction between the two. As it was understood among Neo-Confucians and by early historians of Neo-Confucianism, *chiang-hsüeh* had the clear implication of dialogue, group discussion, and even something approximating our “public discussion,”<sup>39</sup> “Public” might be misleading if it conjured up a picture of modern publicists at work, a substantial Fourth Estate, or the availability of media for wide communication that would contribute to the formation of “public opinion” in the current idiom. Such agencies did not exist in Sung and Ming China. The implicit original context is one of discussion among scholars, or in any case among a comparatively limited, literate social stratum, as well as one of debates largely carried on in schools and academies.

Especially significant in the Ch'ing context, and against the background of the Ch'ing scholarly establishment, is Fang's insistence on the role of schools and academies as centers of discussion

<sup>38</sup> *Ch'üan-chi, K'ao-p'an chi*, 4:32b-33b, “Fang Wangchi hsien-sheng nien-p'u hsü.”

<sup>39</sup> So noted in the original editions of standard dictionaries such as *Tz'u-hai* and *Tz'u-yüan*.

and debate. Earlier, Huang Tsung-hsi, in his *Plan for the Prince* (*Ming-i tai-fang lu*) had made the same point, only to have it largely ignored through the long Ch'ing dominance — and also, we may be reminded, the dominance of the Ch'ing “orthodoxy” which Liang Ch'i-ch'ao had identified with the school of evidential research.

Fang, however, had his own experience of this kind of academic research as a scholar attached to major scholarly projects at leading academies in the Canton area, including the Hsüeh-hai t'ang Academy, center for the production of the monumental compendium of Ch'ing commentaries and treatises on the classics, the *Huang Ch'ing ching-chieh* in 1,400 *chüan* and 366 volumes, under the patronage and direction of the governor-general Juan Yüan. Whether Fang was aware of it or not, support for this academy and its projects more than likely came in part from profits of the opium trade and official collusion in it.<sup>40</sup> Nor was this something Fang needed to know in order to feel keenly, as he did, that the kind of classical scholarship conducted there, though respectable enough in its own way, fell far short of meeting the academies' responsibility for speaking out against dire evils like the opium trade and the threat of encroaching foreign military power.<sup>41</sup> To do this they would have to concern themselves with principles, not just facts.

#### THE PROPHET AND THE PEOPLE

From this brief exposition of Fang's views it should be clear that, as of the mid-nineteenth century, the Confucian tradition of criticism and protest had not lapsed, even though some of its sharpest and most cogent expressions had been effectively suppressed or contained, as was the case with Huang Tsung-hsi's

<sup>40</sup> See Hamaguchi Fujio, “Hō Tō-shu, no kangaku hihan ni tsuite,” in *Nihon Chūgoku gakkaihō* 30 (1978): 175a, citing the studies of Ōkubo Hideko in *Minshin jidai shoin no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kokusho kankō kai, 1976), p. 337.

<sup>41</sup> The point is discussed in Hamaguchi, “Hō Tō-shu,” pp. 170a–72b and Elman, *From Philosophy*, pp. 242–45.

*Ming-i tai-fang lu* and most of the writings of Lü Liu-liang. It is significant too that this line of protest, rather than emerging from the supposedly heterodox teachings of Buddhism and Taoism, peripheral to the power structure, came out of the core of the “Great Tradition,” from scholars known as prime spokesmen for Confucian orthodoxy, or from the main line of Confucian scholarship.

But if indeed this represents a still vital, self-critical Confucian tradition, one naturally asks why its capacity for self-renewal did not operate to greater effect, or show more transformative power, in enabling China to meet the challenges of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? A full answer to these questions obviously lies beyond the reach of these lectures, but having ventured earlier to *compare* examples of such Confucian protest to the prophets of the West, I should like at this juncture to suggest a contrast with the West in how the prophet relates to “the people,” as distinct from “a people.” This applies also to “public” service, in the sense of meeting a common need or shared interest, in contradistinction to serving “a public,” understood as a body of people actively engaged or effectively represented in public affairs. The point here is whether the question of transformative power can be understood solely in relation to the ideas and ideals propounded by prophets and carried by traditional elites, or in terms of the tension between the transcendent and the mundane, without also considering how “prophets” relate to “people” or “a public.”

If I make such a distinction more particularly in respect to the “troubles” Confucianism got itself into, I reiterate that “trouble” here implies no general judgment of a kind so easily and widely reached, both in East and West, concerning the “modern failure” of either China or Confucianism. My intention is simply to address the critical questions Confucians have asked themselves, or would acknowledge as fair and relevant in view of their own avowed aims and historical projects.



The most central of these questions, I would say, pertains to the Confucians' roles as officials, scholars, and teachers. While Confucius had said that learning should be for the sake of one's true self-understanding and self-development, rather than to gain others' approval, it was still the social dimension of this self and its engagement in public life that most distinguished the Confucian's conception of self from that of other traditions. From the beginning, Confucians had accepted a responsibility for the counseling of rulers and the training of men for social and political leadership, as expressed in the ideal of the noble man. From the start too they considered learning and scholarship to be indispensable to the performance of these functions.

It is no less true that their view of learning underwent change over time, as the Confucians responded to new challenges. Expansive periods of intellectual and philosophical growth alternated with phases of retrenchment in which fundamentalist instincts demanded a regrouping of the tradition, as if to keep scholarly inquiry from straying too far from its moral and social base, or, at the opposite extreme, moral zeal from blinding itself to facts. Thus the greatest Confucian minds have managed something of a balance between loyalty to core values and the continued pursuit of "broad learning" through scholarly investigation. Nathan Sivin reminds me that the intensely orthodox Lü Liu-liang had a strong interest in Western science and contributed significantly to medical learning. Likewise, Fang Tung-shu, while complaining of a philology pursued at the expense of moral philosophy, accepted philology and text criticism as necessary branches of learning and himself spoke of "pursuing truth through facts."

One can of course ask whether this pursuit of truth, as conceived in Confucian humanistic terms, would ever lead to the kinds of speculation being advanced in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jerome Grieder, in his review of Benjamin Elman's *From Philosophy to Philology*, asked why Ch'ing evidential scholarship, though methodologically innova-

tive, remained “epistemologically sterile.” “‘Why no Newton in China?’” he says, “has become almost a dismissive cliché. Should we not be asking instead (or as well) ‘Why no Kant?’”<sup>42</sup>

That kind of question, if fairly and fully explored, would lead us off into the kinds of trouble the West got into, while I must stick here to the troubles Confucians faced—questions such as Fang Tung-shu left us with at the end of his *Reckoning with the Han Learning*. The trouble with China, as he saw it, in the mid-nineteenth century, was its failure to sustain the kind of discussion and consultation he considered vital to the promotion of the common welfare. If then, as he claims, the sage-kings, Confucius, Mencius, and all the great Confucians had urged the indispensability of such learning by discussion (or discussion of learning) to the political process; if, moreover, it had already been a distinguishing mark of the Confucians, according to Li Ssu in the third century B.C., that they “talked together about the Odes and Documents” as a way of invoking the past to criticize the present; and if, further, generations of Neo-Confucians, following the Ch’eng brothers and Chu Hsi, had insisted on self-criticism and open discussion of political means and ends, then how is it that, in Fang’s own estimation, so little had come of this by the late Ch’ing period?

In the early and middle twentieth century this question went unaddressed by most modern scholars, no doubt on the widespread but mistaken assumption that the fault lay with the Confucians for their elitism—their unwillingness to share literacy and learning with the masses, and their alleged tendency to reserve education to the upper classes. This, the prevalent theory went, prevented the great majority of Chinese from any significant participation in public affairs. There is some truth in this idea but it fails to credit the actual intention of the Confucians to do quite otherwise—to share learning as widely as possible with the

<sup>42</sup> *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (May 1987): 390.

people. I have touched on this problem in my Ch'ien Mu Lectures at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, again in my Reischauer Lectures at Harvard University, and yet again in a book entitled *Neo-Confucian Education* now in the process of publication by the University of California Press. If I reopen it here, it is in recognition of the Confucians' own sense that, ironically considering the great value they attached to education, the results had to be seen as a real disappointment.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Confucians' lack of success in public education. Neo-Confucians regularly bewailed the failure to achieve the universal school system advocated by Chu Hsi, following other proponents of this idea earlier in the Sung dynasty. Yet if everyone endorsed this proposal, still the repeated exhortations of scholars and recurrent edicts of rulers accomplished little. Even in the schools that did get built, as Chang Po-hsing, champion of Chu Hsi orthodoxy in the high Ch'ing, complained, education was too much oriented to the civil service examination and failed to achieve Chu Hsi's liberal, humanistic aim that education should serve the moral renewal and cultural uplift of the people as a whole, that is, that it should serve broader, more fundamental, purposes than simply bureaucratic recruitment.<sup>43</sup>

One could explain this to a degree by pointing to certain basic facts of life in China. As an agrarian society, with a dense population depending upon intensive agriculture, its farming families felt strong economic pressures to keep the young and able-bodied laboring in the fields rather than release them from work for study in school. Throughout the land, even the poorest peasants may have prayed for their offspring to be so well endowed with scholarly talents that they might succeed in the examinations, but as a practical matter few would be able to fulfill such an ambition. Moreover, the imperial bureaucracy, though dominating most

<sup>43</sup> Chang Po-hsing, *Cheng-i t'ang ch'üan-shu*, Fu-chou cheng-i hsüeh-yuan ed., 1868, 1:1, personal preface to the *Ch'eng-Shih jih-ch'eng*.

areas of national life, was not sizable enough and possessed of enough offices to absorb large numbers of candidates, however eager and promising they might appear to be. Lacking too was any substantial middle class that could provide alternative careers or could support, with their surplus wealth and leisure, cultural pursuits or institutions substantially independent of the literocacy and the official establishment (or at least sufficiently so as to constitute attractive, alternative paths of educational advancement).

A similar situation existed with respect to what in the West would be called the church. Religious organizations in China were fragmented and offered no institutional base for schools, colleges, or universities such as the church supported in the West. Religious vocations there were, but these led in radically different directions from secular education. Training for the religious life was commonly understood to demand disengagement from established society and culture, though not of course from the people's worldly sufferings or their persistent religious aspirations.

The resulting pattern then, was marked by ironies and paradox, with a dominant Confucian tradition that exalted learning and insisted on its wide diffusion as the sine qua non of a viable political and social order, yet found itself incapable of realizing its educational aims except on the basic level of the family or in the higher but much more restricted sphere of the ruling elite. In contrast to this stood a welter of clan cults and native or hybrid popular faiths, answering to the religious needs of the common people but participating hardly at all in government, secular learning, or practical education. Thus, among the peasant masses religion remained as out of touch with the higher learning and with rational discourse on public issues as the Confucians were removed from the dynamics of religious faith in the "hearts and minds of the people."

In this situation the Confucians could be seen as constituting a political and cultural elite, not by any intention of theirs, but rather by virtue of their heavy involvement in the mandarin state as

well as their engagement in a high level of scholarly erudition, distinguished for its critical rationality and literary sophistication but mostly beyond the reach of minimally educated masses. Confucius had wanted all men to be brothers; Mencius had taught that any government would fail if it did not see to the education of its people; and Chu Hsi had insisted on the renewal of the people through education as fundamental to all governance, yet in the end, in the final days of late imperial China, this noble ambition proved impossible for Confucius to achieve.

In *East Asian Civilizations* I have pointed to the growing realization on the part of late-nineteenth-century reformers like K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao that the failure in education had been a crucial factor in China's inability to mobilize its human resources against the challenge of the West and Japan. Some of these same reformers, as well as conservative critics of reform, agreed that the obvious lack of a unified national consciousness betrayed a failure of leadership to reach the "hearts and minds" of the people. Some contrasted this perceived weakness of China to the power of nationalism in Japan and the West, and some saw the latter's power to mobilize peoples' energies as further linked to the religious dynamism of Shinto and Christianity —whence K'ang Yu-wei's belated and futile attempt to recast Confucianism as a state religion, in the erroneous belief (of a kind to which mandarins were so prone) that a state religion could serve just as well as a popular or mass religion.

It is perhaps significant too that many of these reformers, in both Japan and China in the nineteenth century, saw this crisis as prefigured, philosophically speaking, by the split in Neo-Confucian ranks between Wang Yang-ming and the Chu Hsi school —between Wang's emphasis on the moral and spiritual springs of human action, on the one hand, and the careful balance Chu Hsi had maintained between the moral and rational, affective and intellectual, faculties. One could perhaps argue that such a reconciliation was not inherently implausible, as witness the successful

blending of Confucian scholarship, feudal loyalties, and Shinto religious beliefs in later Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan. In the conditions of Ch'ing China, however, this was not so practicable or so easily accomplished. Whether one sees Confucianism as represented by the mandarin and its civil service mentality or by the alternative scholarly "orthodoxy" Liang Ch'i-ch'ao identified with the evidential research (*k'ao-cheng*) movement in classical studies, one can see that in the given circumstances it had proven difficult for Confucians to fulfill all that their own legacy demanded of them.

In classical, humanistic learning Ch'ing scholars, arguably, lived up to Chu Hsi's high standards of critical scholarship. Even in terms of human governance one might allow (notwithstanding the severe negative judgments of a Huang Tsung-hsi, Lu Liu-lang, or Fang Tung-shu), that the Ch'ing record up to 1800 in managing the affairs of so large a country and so massive a population was probably unmatched by any other regime in history. Yet for all this the Confucians fell well short of fulfilling their primitive and perennial vision of achieving Heaven on earth through the rule of sage-kings guided by noble men.

This was, of course, a vision of the noble man as prophet, and the failure of the Confucians to achieve it, while no greater than that of any other major world tradition fully to realize its ideals, reminds us again of the original limitations and qualifications of the prophetic office as exercised by the noble man. These had to do with his specific and distinctive commitment to public service (government and education) in ways not typically associated with prophets in the Semitic religions. But it also involved a significant difference between the Confucian concept of Heaven and its mandate and the more intensely theistic conception in the Judeo-Christian tradition of a personal god dealing with his human creation both as persons and as a "people." For the Confucians "the people" were indeed Heaven's creation, and Heaven presided over their fate and fortune in a way expressed by the mandate of

Heaven, with the ruler as the crucial intermediary or surrogate — the “Son of Heaven,” who alone offered sacrifice at the temple of Heaven. As our Neo-Confucians Lü Liu-liang and Fang Tung-shu interpreted this, it was the people who spoke for Heaven and the noble man who spoke to the ruler, but still not Heaven which spoke directly to its people in the way God spoke through Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah to “*His* people,” the people with whom He had made a personal contract and covenant. In the language of Jeremiah (31:31):

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord. But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel in those days, says the Lord. I will place the law within them and write it upon their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people.

In Confucianism, though Heaven’s imperative (or decree) is, as human nature,<sup>44</sup> likewise “placed within them and written upon their hearts,” the people remain subject to the ruler by Heaven’s mandate. It is, then, the ruler who leads the people (not God leading them “by his own hand”), while the “people” are seen as commoners (*min*) — the vast undifferentiated mass who serve the ruler and in turn are meant to be served by him. For his part the noble man, in his prophetic role, could be a Warner to the ruler, reminding him of his obligation to provide for the public welfare, but as one committed to public service, as a member of the ruling class, the noble man ministered to the ruler and, ideally, acted as his colleague and mentor. His function was to warn the emperor but not, it seems, like Moses and Jeremiah, ever to warn or scold the people, as if they too were active and responsible par-

<sup>44</sup> See the *Mean*, chap. 1, or Chu Hsi, *Chung-yung chang-chü* 1, for Heaven’s imperative as manifested in human nature.

ticipants in the fulfilling of a covenant. When and how, in China were the people to become involved, as if they too were answerable to God for their part in fulfilling the covenant? When and how, as “his people” carrying out his commandments, were the Chinese people to come together in organized congregations, assemblies, and churches, with their own leaders, priests and ministers, to do the will of God? No, the Confucians were ministers to the ruler, not to a “people,” themselves answerable to Heaven.

What could be at issue here is the sense in which we understand the word “public” in these different contexts, and how this understanding conditions or qualifies the role of the prophet. In classical Confucianism, Mencius, the spokesman par excellence for the noble man, underscored the fundamental importance of the “people” (*min*) in politics, but the people seen primarily as deserving of leadership responsive to their needs, and only in the extreme case with rulers responsible to them by virtue of the people’s reserved “right of revolution.” Mencius also distinguished between an educated ruling class serving the interests of the “people,” and the larger mass of those who worked with their hands and lacked the education and training needed for them to take an active part in government, except when things got bad enough for the people to revolt (*Mencius* 3A:4). In making this distinction Mencius foreswore none of his meritocratic, egalitarian principles in favor of a social or political elitism, but only reflected a functional differentiation between leaders and commoners already well established by his time and not even to be effectively overturned by modern Maoists, with all their commitment to a classless society.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Even the social leveler Mo Tzu affirmed the need for such a functional dichotomy: “[Heaven] desires that among men those who have strength will work for others, those who understand the Way will teach others, and those who possess wealth will share it with others. . . . It also desires that those above will diligently attend to matters of government, and those below will diligently carry out their tasks” (*Basic Works of Mo Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson [New York: Columbia University Press, 1963]), p. 85.



For their part the Neo-Confucians, advocates of universal education in furtherance of the peoples' welfare, promoted popular education primarily through self-cultivation and disciplined self-governance (*hsiu-chi chih jen*) in the context of family life and the local community, leaving a considerable gulf between learning on this level and the higher forms of scholarship or of the expertise required in the civil servant. In the absence then of any significant infrastructure between family and local community on the lower level, and the political and cultural organizations of the educated elite on the higher level, there were few channels that could serve as organs of "public opinion" to communicate between the two or support the noble man at court in his service of the public interest.

No doubt this oversimplified model of China's political structure and process will invite challenge from those who can think readily of the infrastructure represented by local and regional organizations of an economic, social, and religious character, which at times played a significant part in Chinese life. The question is, however, whether these were able to perform any role in the political process —that is, address themselves to and carry on a sustained discourse concerning issues of the larger, public interest —to such an extent that either mandarins or scholars would think of the "people" as in any sense an active, corporate body, able effectively to support a sustained political program. More especially it would be a question whether such a program was reformist or radical enough to achieve the transformation of the established order (presumably, in the view of Max Weber and Karl Jaspers, the mission of prophets).

To me it is striking that our Neo-Confucian scholars, handicapped in performing their "prophetic" office by the lack of organized support among an articulate citizenry or from organs of public opinion, all too often stood alone in facing the power concentrated in the ruler, or in coping with the Byzantine workings or factional infighting of the imperial bureaucracy. The more con-

scientious of them could easily become martyrs, or more often political dreamers, but rarely successful statesmen achieving noble goals. Thus, for Confucians as scholars in the late Ch'ing, it was natural enough to look to the schools and academies (the way Fang Tung-shu did) as the only likely sources of informed support and for nineteenth-century reformers to turn to scholarly circles when, moved perhaps by Fang Tung-shu's line of argument, they wished to mobilize public opinion through what was called *ching-i* (disinterested discussion). Yet the term "public" discussion could be applied to this advocacy only in the sense of what was in the common interest, conforming to Heaven's universal principles, not in the Western sense of a "public" as a "people."

Still, as Fang Tung-shu himself complained, the schools and academies had long since ceased to serve as centers of public discussion, as they had formerly in the middle and late years of the Ming dynasty. And if, among religious or fraternal organizations, one still might think to turn to secret societies, their very secret or esoteric character ensured their ineffectuality as organs of public advocacy.

Thus reform movements at the end of the dynasty lacked any effective political base. Out of touch with the masses, unsupported by any party that could claim to be "popular" (i.e., more than a faction), reformers were prophets without a people. Sun Yat-sen recognized this when he spoke of the Chinese as a "heap of loose sand" and sought, in the first of his "People's Principles," to make of them a people or nation in the Western sense. To the left of Sun, socialists and anarchists faced the same problem. Though their doctrines were predicated on a claim to represent the people or the proletariat, in fact, as Bertrand Russell noted in 1921, this remained, in the absence of any organization of people or workers, purely theoretical.<sup>46</sup> The collapse of the monarchy in 1911 had not altered this age-old condition.

<sup>46</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), pp. 169–70.

Thus, it was left to Mao Tse-tung to “go to the people,” mobilize them politically and organize them militarily in pursuit of revolutionary goals. Unfortunately, having learned little from the long and conflicted Confucian experience, and understanding poorly the true depths and persistence of the troubles Confucians had run into, Mao underestimated the magnitude of the problem and made the historically unprecedented attempt, as revolutionary leader, of trying to combine in himself the roles of both prophet and sage-king. In the end, though Mencius’s “people” exercised no right of revolution, they turned their backs on Mao and his retinue, leaving him too, like so many of his predecessors, a prophet without a people.

It takes no great expertise or political insight to discern the persistence of the same problem in China today. The current leadership may be somewhat more enlightened and collegial in character than it was under Mao, but the political process has not yet been significantly broadened. Rule by a political elite, justifying itself as a party dictatorship ruling *for* the people, still tends to inhibit and repress the expression of popular opinion. Especially by coming down hard on political activism in the universities, the Communist party has tended to insulate itself from such “public opinion” as might be found there, in the absence of any other forum for open discussion and debate.

Before concluding, since my assignment has been to discuss “some problem in human values,” it would not be enough if I showed that the trouble with Confucianism was only a problem for China but not for us, or if I seemed to contrast historical conditions in China to those in the West without acknowledging that we too face many of the same troubles today. True, in the West we do not lack for political advocacy or legal institutions to protect it, but can we say, in the schools and universities of the West today, that they sustain serious political dialogue and rational discussion of major public issues? The University of California at Berkeley and Columbia University, in 1968, became great sym-

bols of political activism, but in my experience, all too often this activism was of a kind that resorted to political pressure —striking, marching, chanting, and sloganizing —and not of a kind that encouraged rational discussion or mutual dialogue. Often, dissenting voices could not be heard because of the threat of disruption or intimidation, while many faculty and students preferred, like the great Ch'ing scholars of evidential research, to go about their own specialized studies, rather than run the political gauntlet awaiting those who would try to participate in civil dialogue on public issues.

On another level, however, these may well be only superficial manifestations of a more deep-seated problem: the difficulty the Confucians had of sustaining their humanism in the midst of an increasingly complex society and culture, which necessitated new technologies if not new sciences, and, as it has turned out in our own day no less than in Ch'ing times, even new and highly refined technologies in the so-called “humanities.” Whatever judgment one might make about Confucianism and China's success or failure in science and technology, it will, now and in the future, imply a similar question for us —how do we sustain the core values of a humanistic tradition in the midst of rapid social and technological change? If the Confucians paid a price for their stubborn adherence to a classical tradition, and to a canon enshrined in a difficult classical language, can we not see ourselves facing a similar dilemma in American education as to how such core values — and a core curriculum to communicate them— are to be maintained? Television and modern means of almost instant electronic communication may seem to facilitate mass education, but if we are talking about active learning and participation, can we say that the modern audience is any less passive and inert a “public” than China's peasant masses were, or that even our TV debates do substantially more than register certain personalities on the popular mind, without engendering much serious, substantial, and rational discourse?

No doubt these questions themselves allow of no simple yes or no answer, but they may help to make us aware that the “trouble” with Confucianism, like the trouble with Harry, has not gone away, but remains there —in fact, all over the place —for us and the Chinese to reckon with.